

# Fan Fuel: Big questions for Canucks following swift exit

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Contrary to popular belief, the Vancouver Canucks were not harmlessly swept aside by the San Jose Sharks because they “didn’t flip the switch”, or played “cocky”, or any other mindless hockey cliché to rationalize why a veteran team laden with high expectations failed to deliver.

There are real, tangible reasons why the Canucks failed to win a game in the playoffs and have won just one postseason game since a heartbreaking, city-devastating, loss at home in game seven of the Stanley Cup final.

The emotional reaction to another playoff disappointment is to call for the organization to clean house. That approach for this team is neither realistic nor sensible.

First, let’s get this out of the way. Goaltending was not the problem this season. Whether it was Cory Schneider or Roberto Luongo between the pipes, when the goaltending was on, it hid Vancouver’s deficiencies and the Canucks appeared to be at least fringe-contenders. When Schneider or Luongo had a bad night or were merely average, the Canucks were exposed as no longer being the same team that won back-to-back President’s Trophies and produced two scoring title champions between 2009-2010 and 2011-2012.

The psycho-babble about the goalie situation and the alleged emotional effect that it had on the team was a major media storyline throughout the season but looking at the situation through analytics, it’s an angle that can be thoroughly dismissed. Even though it wasn’t the reason for this season’s regression, Luongo will likely finally be moved to free up cap space and allow the team to improve in other areas.

In short, the Canucks reverted back to the team from the first three years of the Luongo/good Sedins/Vigneault era. A team overly reliant on goaltending that struggled to score at an elite level.

Below is a graph that outlines the Canucks goal scoring output over the last seven seasons.

Seasons	Average goals per game	Average goals against per game
06-07 – 08-09	2.77	2.59
09-10 – 11-12	3.18 (+14.8%)	2.46
'13 (48 games)	2.65 (-16.7%)	2.52

Another factor in Vancouver's offensive regression was their sudden decline in power play. Even an overlooked story like never finding replacement to fill Manny Malholtra's role as a defensive-zone faceoff specialist, a strategy the Canucks used effectively to allow Daniel and Henrik Sedin to start the majority of their shifts in the offensive zone.

So, what happens now? Well, the "fire the coach" racket had begun to swirl around Alain Vigneault in the middle of the Sharks series. It's justified even though I'm of the opinion that blaming the coach for team success and failure is overrated. A coaching change is akin to just re-arranging the deck chairs on the patio. It's a different look but the furniture is still the same.

GM Mike Gillis has come under some criticism, especially for his handling of the Luongo/Schneider dilemma, but I would be shocked to see him ousted.

The demand for changes to the roster is predictable but logistically improbable.

On defence, Vancouver doesn't have much room to maneuver. Kevin Bieksa and Dan Hamhuis are committed to for the next three seasons, Jason Garrison for the next five, and Alex Edler for the next six, totaling over \$18 million in salary cap weight. Chris Tanev was efficient and productive in his first season as a regular while Frank Corrado was quietly impressive during his seven game cameo to end the season.

There's likelier to be changes up front. Pending UFA's Derek Roy and Mason Raymond are unlikely to return but the rest of the core of forwards will be back. The Sedin twins enter next season with one season remaining on their contracts. This is where the Canucks future gets interesting. There is no questioning the Sedins' greatness and production since 2005-2006 but this season was their least effective in seven years and for a third straight playoff series they were smothered by their opponents. It's of the utmost importance to Gillis and the Canucks to find a balance between flexibility and loyalty to the twins. Of course, beyond that, hoping that Ryan Kesler's health is not an issue is a given.

Vancouver, like every team in the NHL, has two amnesty buyouts at its disposal this offseason. Keith Ballard and David Booth are the two players on the roster that stand out as potential buyouts.

Look at the history of this franchise. The two other significant eras of Vancouver Canucks hockey also had three-year peaks. The early 90's teams of Linden, Bure, and McLean, enjoyed their best success between 1991-1992 and 1993-1994 that concluded with a game seven loss to the Rangers in the Stanley Cup final, while the early 00's teams defined by the West Coast Express line of Naslund, Bertuzzi, and Morrison, had their run from 2001-2002 to 2003-2004.

Two years ago, this team was one game away from winning the Stanley Cup. Two years later, this offseason will determine if this era of Canucks hockey will separate itself from its predecessors and continue to be a dominant team in the NHL.

There's work to be done.